

# “Luther’s Blunder”: David Watson and Social Christianity in early twentieth-century Scotland

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## A Need for Revision?

Among scholars who in recent years have been exploring Christian social thought in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Scotland there is, at present, a consensus of opinion that from the 1880s a small number of Presbyterian progressives “turned from the evangelical individualism of the previous generation to embrace much of the new social thought”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for instance, D.C. Smith, A.C. Cheyne, Callum Brown and D.J. Withrington<sup>2</sup> would agree with S.J. Brown that these progressives shared a new appreciation of the role that environment plays in shaping individual lives and character:

[The progressives] recognised that overcrowding, poor diet and the drabness of slum life could ensure moral and spiritual defeat for all but the strongest or most fortunate, and that individual vices ... were frequently more the effects than the

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<sup>1</sup> S.J. Brown, “Reform, Reconstruction, Reaction: The Social Vision of Scottish Presbyterianism c.1830-1930”, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 44 (1991), 497.

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945* (New York, 1987) esp. chapters 9 and 10, 245-380; A.C. Cheyne, *The Transformation of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland’s Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983) esp. chapter 5, 110-156; Callum Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (London, 1987) esp. chapter 6, 169-203. In the new edition of this book (Edinburgh, 1997) Brown’s views have not markedly changed; D.J. Withrington, “The Churches in Scotland c.1870-c.1900: towards a new social conscience?”, *ante*, xix (1977), 155-168. See also D.J. Withrington, “Non-churchgoing, Church Organisation and the ‘Crisis in the Church’, c.1880-c.1920”, *ante*, xxiv (1991), 199-236. For a brilliant synthesis of recent scholarship on Social Christianity and its immediate religious and political context: T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation* (London, 1999), esp. chapter 16, “Religion and Society”, 363-388.

causes of poverty. This recognition represented a radical break from the fundamental belief of mid-Victorian evangelicals – that you must first reform the character of individuals before you could hope to reform society.<sup>3</sup>

Through a brief consideration of the social thought of Church of Scotland minister David Watson (1859-1943) this essay will suggest that the “turning away” of progressive Presbyterians from evangelical individualism is less straightforward and less radical than has been suggested. In fact, important progressives like David Watson were still working out, and out of, the tenets of evangelical individualism. It is precisely because such as he were anxious that the centrality of individualism be not unduly diminished in the wake of the new social thought that, following the evaporation of the hope and promise of postwar reconstruction, conservative church leaders in the 1920s were able to silence voices of prophetic protest and social criticism with relative ease.

### **Social Christianity**

Callum Brown has gone further than most in his assertion that from the late 1880s the “Social Question” and the crisis for the dominant Presbyterian churches in Scotland were in large part due to the failure of the evangelical social vision. Moreover, he thinks that the decline of evangelicalism was a consequence of, among other things, the rise of the Labour and socialist movements. The dominance of the evangelical enterprise in the early and mid-Victorian years “had been founded on certainty not only in the social relevancy of evangelical visions but also in their uniqueness for reforming society and removing social ills”.<sup>4</sup> But evangelicalism had operated and “could only operate with any real power, as a single hegemonic ideology unchallenged by contesting ideologies”.<sup>5</sup> For as long as its hegemony was unchallenged evangelicalism was able to incorporate methods of social reform – municipalisation of public utilities, for instance – that in the mid and later twentieth century came to be considered by right-wing Protestant fundamentalists as socialistic and therefore illegitimate. After the

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<sup>3</sup> S.J Brown, “Reform, Reconstruction, Reaction”, 498.

<sup>4</sup> C. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland*, 172.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

1880s, Brown argues, the mid-Victorian type of evangelical call to secular reform faded and the certainty of biblical imprimatur for it withered as the new biblical criticism took hold. Evangelical conviction decayed not least because the call for social reform was coming from socialists and from groups and individuals not motivated by religious concerns at all.<sup>6</sup>

Brown thinks that the impact of the Social Question stunned the churches: their monopoly on respectability was undermined by it and religious concerns were removed from the centre stage of social action. The churches were faced with the prospect that social reform would increasingly come about through collectivist action by the state. State action was not, of course, new; what was “new and daunting”<sup>7</sup> for the churches was that the agenda for reform now no longer emanated from evangelical sources but from New Liberalism and especially from the Labour movement. So, says Brown, the initiative in social action “was passing out of the hands of activists inspired by religion and the bearers of social salvation were now trade union leaders, socialist intellectuals and Labour politicians”.<sup>8</sup> In response to the rise of the Labour movement, which seemed to offer an alternative to evangelical improvement, a small band of Christian progressive thinkers “sought a new ‘social theology’ incorporating ideas drawn from a nexus of social reformers including representatives of organised Labour”.<sup>9</sup>

The new social theology, especially as expressed by those such as David Watson who were impressed by socialism, derived much from evangelicalism but, Brown thinks, differed from it in several important respects. Crucially, the new social theology “rejected the primacy of religious conversion, with its attendant moral virtues, as the source of social salvation”.<sup>10</sup> According to Brown, the new social theology, and the impetus towards the expression of Social Christianity that sprang from it, was a limited and ultimately unsuccessful response to the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 173. But see also C.Brown’s important work on the influence of the godly commonwealth ideal in the Civic Gospel in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Scotland: “‘To be aglow with civic ardours’: the ‘Godly Commonwealth’ in Glasgow, 1843-1914”, *ante*, xxvi (1996) 169-195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

social prophecy and collectivist ideals of the Labour and socialist movements. And the social prophecy of these movements expressed a new ideology that was capable of challenging the hegemony of evangelicalism because it was not a child of evangelicalism.

Elsewhere<sup>11</sup> I have argued that in fact the socialist *revivalism* of the ILP, the party that dominated the socialist movement in Scotland from the later 1890s down to 1914 and beyond, can be located well within the matrix of evangelical-mission culture. Socialist revivalism was in large measure modifying and re-orchestrating the radical impulse of Presbyterianism albeit in the distinctive economic, political and social conditions of the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries. Indeed, socialist revivalism in Scotland was testimony to the success of evangelicalism not to its failure. As with many churchgoing evangelicals socialist revivalists were highly ambivalent in their attitude towards individualism and this, too, owed something to the fact that evangelical categories of thought were embedded in socialist revivalism. Insightful and penetrating though Callum Brown's analysis is, it is not entirely convincing.

There can be no doubt that from the 1880s a small number of Presbyterian churchmen did begin forthrightly to criticise and condemn the practices of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the individualism associated with it. They did argue that it was false and unchristian to attribute poverty and deprivation solely to individuals' moral and spiritual weaknesses. In their efforts to express Social Christianity they were indeed strongly influenced by socialism and by new thinking about the role of environment, new thinking expressed most famously in, for instance, the remarkable reports of the investigations of Charles Booth (1889) and Seebohm Rowntree (1899).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. McCabe, "Evangelicalism and the Socialist Revival: A Study of Religion, Community and Culture in Nineteenth Century Airdrie" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1992). See also M. McCabe, "The Tears of the Poor: John Glasse, Christian Socialist (1848-1918)", *ante*, xxviii (1998), 149-172; M. McCabe, "A Question of Culture? Evangelicalism and the Failure of Socialist Revivalism in Airdrie, c. 1890-1914", *ante*, xxix, 1999, 107-118.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the "environmental factor" see Withrington, "The Churches in Scotland". Charles Booth was of Unitarian background. He was an ardent supporter of capitalism, but wanted to make it more humane. He detested



However, it is a mistake to conclude from this that these churchmen wanted to abandon the imperatives of evangelical individualism. They did not. On the contrary, in differing degrees they wanted to reform and revitalise evangelicalism as a force for shaping community and culture. Some wanted to do so by a more vigorous application of well-tried methods. Others, like David Watson, thought that, to an extent, evangelicalism had gone too far in its affirmation of individualism and wanted to revive and re-present the evangelical social vision by reasserting the communal tradition of historic Reformed theology and Presbyterianism. This tradition was fundamental to Thomas Chalmers' godly commonwealth ideal, an earlier evangelical effort to unite individualism with collective and environmental concerns and one which was very much in the minds of Presbyterian progressives at the beginning of the twentieth century not least because of the revival of Chalmers' social ideal in the Established Church after 1874 as part of the Church Defence campaign against calls from the Free Church for disestablishment.<sup>13</sup>

Progressives like Watson were not critical of individualism as such, but they were concerned that over-emphasising it in politics, economics and social thought had resulted in discrimination in favour of the rich and well-off to the detriment of the welfare of the poor and working classes. In the church and theology too, they argued, excessive attention to individualism turned religion into an exclusive club for the comfortable and converted and obscured the communal ethic that lay at the heart of Christianity. Progressive Presbyterians' call for a reconsideration of evangelical individualism and its implications for church and society was certainly informed by the rise of socialism and radical Liberalism. But more important, it was also

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socialism. See Philip Waller, "Charles Booth, 1840-1916", in *Founders of the Welfare State*, ed. Paul Barker (London, 1984), 37-44. Seebohm Rowntree was a Quaker who regarded the suffering caused by poverty as incompatible with Quaker beliefs about "that of God" which is in everyone. See John Veit Wilson, "Seebohm Rowntree, 1871-1954", in Barker, *Founders of the Welfare State*, 74-82.

<sup>13</sup> See also C. Brown, "'To be aglow with civic ardours'", and S.J. Brown, "Thomas Chalmers and the Communal Ideal in Victorian Scotland" in *Victorian Values: A joint symposium of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the British Academy*, ed. T.C. Smout (Oxford, 1992), 61-80.

based on an awareness that evangelicalism, and indeed Protestant Christianity as a whole, had a communitarian tradition that could be updated to take greater account of, and be more emphatic about, the importance, in a Christian society, of co-operation, communalism, environment *and social equality*. In other words, Presbyterian progressives argued that evangelical Protestantism was not, and never had been, irreversibly shackled to individualism at the expense of community; it was not bound to favour the few at the expense of the many. As Withrington has noted, theirs was in part an attempt "to redefine older idealisms" and consequently, there was much searching around

in the social welfare principles enunciated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, to meet the strains of...new social and political situations strengthened by an updated and living tradition.<sup>14</sup>

And much searching, too, in the light of the new biblical criticism, in the New Testament itself.

For the Presbyterian progressives the church's future could only be assured if it took a vital part, alongside a benevolent state, in social reform which improved the lives of all the people. "That alone", says Withrington,

was the condition in which moral and spiritual teaching could be effective. Support for just social reform was a necessary (if, indeed, not a primary) function of the churches; and the new social conscience of the later nineteenth century, to be based firmly on Christ-centred teaching, was every bit as much a religious as a political or generally humanitarian response.<sup>15</sup>

### David Watson

An exemplar of this "new social conscience", David Watson was minister of St Clement's Church of Scotland in Glasgow from 1886 until 1938. In the course of this long ministry Watson became well known as an advocate of the new Social Christianity. He was, among other things, the founder and President of the Scottish Christian Social

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<sup>14</sup> Withrington, "The Churches in Scotland", 168.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

Union, the author of a string of books and articles on the church and social questions, a key figure on the Church of Scotland's Commission on the War [1917-18] and instrumental in the setting-up of the Church and Nation Committee [1919].<sup>16</sup> He argued that the new social thought, and particularly socialism, highlighted serious weaknesses in the way that the evangelical social vision had developed. But he was *not* a socialist. Indeed, he thought that in the end one of the principal lessons to be learned from socialism was "the eternal value of individualism".<sup>17</sup> What he meant by this was that the need for better social conditions for the poor and working classes, and the need for spiritually and morally changed individuals were complementary. The link between individual change and social change was not deterministic in one direction only: individual change was not a prerequisite of social change; improved social conditions of themselves did not necessarily produce better citizens. And, Watson argued, this is exactly what Christianity had always taught even though the churches had sometimes lost sight of it. Christians, therefore, had to be continually reminded that individual conversion was no use unless it led people to convert others and thence to transform society; social changes by themselves were no good without individuals whose conversion to Christianity made them moral, upright citizens. But – and crucially – individual conversion was less likely to happen if people suffered in appalling living and working conditions, as so many of Scotland's people most certainly did. On these points Watson declared himself to be at one with ILP leader Keir Hardie who had said that

if we had every reform which the most advanced reformer demands without having the elevation of personal moral

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<sup>16</sup> For biographical details on Watson: *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, ed. H. Scott, (Edinburgh, 1920), iii, 436; and viii, Addenda and Corrigenda (Edinburgh, 1950), 300. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*, 330-333; Smith, "David Watson" in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, edd. N.M. de Cameron *et al.*, (Edinburgh, 1993), 856. Watson collaborated with W.P. Paterson, another leading figure on the progressive wing of the Kirk, to produce an account of the Commission on the War, *Social Evils and Problems: The Church of Scotland Commission on the War* (Edinburgh, 1919).

<sup>17</sup> David Watson, *Perfect Manhood* (London, 1905), p. vii.



character side by side with them, they would only bring increased evil and no good whatever.<sup>18</sup>

Watson here drew attention to socialists' ambivalence in attitude and approach to individualism and he was right to do so. Scottish socialists were seldom able satisfactorily to resolve the tensions between their demand for individual change of heart (conversion to socialism) and for communalism and state collectivism. This is hardly surprising. Scottish socialists had been raised in the shadow of the Calvinist godly commonwealth ideal, the Covenanters' myth and the great communitarian experiments of nineteenth century Presbyterianism as well as of Owenism. And in none of these schemes were the tensions between individualism and communalism satisfactorily resolved. This should warn us against the temptation to equate, on the one hand, evangelicalism with individualism and individual salvation and, on the other, socialism with communalism, collectivism and social salvation, and then to treat the two as if they were locked in irreconcilable ideological conflict. The relationship between individualism and communalism *within* evangelicalism or *within* socialism was always more complex and difficult than such simple equations allow.

It is true, as Watson himself acknowledged, that in the early and mid-Victorian years evangelicalism was deeply concerned with individual conversion and was paternalistic rather than egalitarian. But this did not mean that evangelicals thought that there was no such thing as society. On the contrary, one of the long-term consequences of early and mid-Victorian evangelicalism was to point society in a more collectivist direction not least because evangelicalism depended for its success upon a rich, associational culture and the corporate, communal ethic that associationalism generated. In their day-to-day interactions with the world evangelicals demonstrated how individualism and communalism *nourished each other*.<sup>19</sup> So at the end of the nineteenth century Presbyterian progressives like Watson were able to press the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mark Noll, "Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Communities" in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles and Beyond*, edd. M.A. Noll, D.W. Bebbington and G.A. Rawlks (Oxford, 1994), 113-136.



claims of a renewed evangelical social vision that called for and supported social reform, communalism and state collectivism precisely because evangelicalism had always been highly ambivalent in attitude and approach to individualism and had always had an important communal dimension.

### Perfect Manhood

Though less strident in tone than Malcolm MacCallum of Muchairn, and avoiding the revolutionary fervour that MacCallum displayed,<sup>20</sup> David Watson was no less committed to reforming the church's outlook on, and approach to, social matters. He was convinced that individuals could and must be changed through Christ but that a Christian society without social justice was a contradiction in terms. Consequently he directed his efforts towards persuading the church that in social matters the right balance between individualism and communalism had to be struck. It was the church's duty to persuade individuals to become disciples of Christ at the same time as it championed the cause of social reform.

By the early 1900s Watson was increasingly concerned that the thrust of the new social thought and the demand for legislative solutions to social problems pursued by radical Liberals and socialists might result in a diminishing of the importance of the individual and individual freedom. There was a danger, he argued, that too much state interference would undermine individual initiative, effort, responsibility and self-esteem. He was also worried that there seemed to be a tendency in the new social thought to elevate the material aspects of life at the expense of the moral. The goal of all social reform, he argued, was the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth "but it is becoming increasingly clear that our way to the kingdom *is through the individual*"<sup>21</sup> [my emphasis]. For the kingdom to be the kingdom of God it had to consist of individuals who were of good, righteous character because they were Christian. Individual lives as well as society had to be changed.

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<sup>20</sup> For more on MacCallum see S.J. Brown, "Reform, Reconstruction, Reaction", 503-504.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, vii. For analysis of the objective of realising the kingdom of God on earth see C. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730*, 190-192.

In *Perfect Manhood* (1905), the aim of which was to help produce “souls of good quality” as well as healthy bodies and cultured minds,<sup>22</sup> Watson outlined the basis of his thinking on the Social Question. For the next thirty years all of his writings and teachings on Social Christianity consisted of attempts to clarify and refine the views expressed in this volume.

Watson argued that in all systems of thought or religion there was a constant tension between character and circumstance, between people and their environment, between the internal and the external:

The pendulum swings between them. Now it inclines to the one, now to the other. During the first half of the nineteenth century the influence of the environment was practically ignored, but during the second half, and especially since the days of Maurice and the Christian Socialists, environment has been fully recognised as a vital factor in the making of men. Never again will it be neglected.<sup>23</sup>

But, he continued, “today the pendulum has begun to swing back”.<sup>24</sup> It was becoming apparent that social reform by itself could not produce the good society. “Perfect manhood” could not be achieved through social reforms alone; individuals themselves had to become moral. The necessary condition of perfect manhood was an understanding of Christ who, unlike scientific materialists who “dethrone and belittle” the individual,<sup>25</sup> had proclaimed the infinite value of each individual human soul. Human beings were physical, mental and spiritual beings and the good society must cater for all these dimensions of humanity. Reforms in health, education, housing and industrial practises were important and must be demanded by the

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<sup>22</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, vii. Much of Watson’s thinking in this book is refined and expanded in *Social Problems and the Church’s Duty* (London, 1908), *Social Advance: Its Meaning, Message and Goal* (London, 1911) – which includes his Gunning Lectures delivered at Edinburgh University in 1910-1911 – *The Social Expression of Christianity* (London, 1919) and *The Church at Work* (Edinburgh, 1926).

<sup>23</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

church from the state, but without the moral and spiritual values inculcated by religion there could be no good and righteous society.

However, religion had to avoid “the extremes of worldliness and of other worldliness”.<sup>26</sup> The otherworldly extremists of conservative evangelicalism placed heaven solely in the hereafter and so had no real interest in better social conditions for the poor. The this-worldly extremists of secularism had no faith in a destiny hereafter but sought heaven on earth in the here-and-now “through the physical and material only”.<sup>27</sup> But, Watson argued, a better world could not be achieved through material prosperity alone. Moreover, the secularists’ “glorification of doubt”<sup>28</sup> had to be countered by a reassertion of the “masculine teachings”<sup>29</sup> of such as Robert Browning who had said that the establishment of God in Christ ““accepted by ... reason, solves for thee all questions in earth and out of it””.<sup>30</sup> Thus did Watson reveal his evangelical credentials and concerns and his attachment to the tradition of muscular Christianity associated with Charles Kingsley and Arnold of Rugby.<sup>31</sup>

The greatest fact of the universe, he said, is “the fact of Christ ... wisest of teachers ... the ideal man ... uniquely divine”.<sup>32</sup> The only cure for the selfishness that undermined attempts to build the good society was Christ; He was the necessary counter to debilitating materialist philosophies which could only result in humanity condemned to live and die without ultimate salvation. And salvation – reconciliation with God – was what life was *really* about. Individuals ignored this at their peril. The “grand aim” of Christianity was

to produce a perfect manhood, to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus to enable each to attain to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ. Christ is at once the measure

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. See also Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes* (London, 1965) esp. chapter 6, 148-175.

<sup>32</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 55.

and the maker of manhood. Full moral and spiritual stature is attained only in and through Him.<sup>33</sup>

Individual salvation *and* social salvation were based on this grand aim. Each and every man and woman had to strive “to get into tune with the Divine Will”.<sup>34</sup> The goal of manhood was sonship of God and service to others. It was crucial, said Watson, for people to understand that individuals cannot become fully human, truly perfect, apart from Christ or apart from society. So perfecting oneself for its own sake was pure selfishness. However, only by perfecting the individual could the social ideal be realised for only changed individuals could bring about a changed society. Therefore, while it was important to “get rid of the evils of rank individualism” it was just as important to “meet the objections commonly brought against legitimate individualism”.<sup>35</sup>

The social mission of the church was to campaign for the building of a socially just society, a society in which no-one’s body, mind or spirit was crushed by poverty and deprivation. But this did *not* mean that the people so freed were relieved of their need to become disciples of Christ. Social mission was precisely that: mission, *evangelism*. The point of social reform by the state, argued Watson, was to create a society that would enable all people to enter into a life of full citizenship. But the fount of the values of true citizenship was Christianity.

In short, Watson’s social thought was in continuity with Reformed thinking as it had been expressed in Scotland by the Established Church for three centuries: the state ought to be the partner of the church in working for the creation of a godly commonwealth. Social, political and economic questions were, therefore, legitimate provinces for the application of Christian principles. Watson attacked those “evangelists of narrow culture and even narrower sympathies” who emphasised “exclusive consecration”.<sup>36</sup> Such limited vision was responsible for a “disastrous divorce between the sacred and the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 227.



secular”.<sup>37</sup> If the incarnation meant anything at all then it meant the sanctification of the whole of life and society:

Inclusive consecration is the ideal for perfect manhood; not one day but all days are sacred, not one place but every place is holy ground, not one act but every act performed as in the sight of God, every bush aflame with God, life in its entirety divine and holy.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, for Watson the primary business of the church was still that familiar evangelical imperative: conversion of individual men and women.<sup>39</sup> Without this imperative the church would become nothing more than a glorified social work agency or a secular pressure group with no greater claim to be heard or listened to than any other pressure group. Christ was the only hope of a reconstructed society and if the church does not “win men and women to the law and service of Christ she neglects her business and fails”.<sup>40</sup> He emphasised that conversion was evolutionary rather than instant but he never compromised his belief that individuals needed to be converted. So the twin tasks of winning disciples and building the kingdom of God on earth, not least by calling for and supporting social reform, were tasks that the church should carry out concurrently. In short, *pace* Callum Brown, Watson did *not* reject the primacy of conversion and was clear that it *was* the source of social salvation. The mistake in the past, he argued, had been to view individual conversion and social change as separate, and to emphasise the former at the expense of the latter. By overstating the belief that individual change must always precede social change the church had neglected her societal duty. For this reason the church bore heavy responsibility for the ailments of modern society.

### A Guilty Church

Although the First World War came as shock to Watson it did not weaken his commitment to social reconstruction. Indeed he thought that the experience of wartime collectivism and the government’s

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>39</sup> Watson, *The Church at Work* (Edinburgh, 1926), 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

promises of “homes fit for heroes” provided a tremendous opportunity to create a more just and equal society than had existed before the war.<sup>41</sup>

However, he also thought that it would be foolish for progressives to be complacent or over-optimistic because the war had exposed a society suffering “with a new intensity” from “social disintegration”.<sup>42</sup> The evidence of this disintegration was to be seen all around: in the countryside in depopulation and decaying villages, in the cities with their extremes of wealth and poverty, and in the world of industry with its “strikes and labour wars ... hostility between capital and labour”.<sup>43</sup> Disintegration was also plainly at work in the home, its fruits apparent in scepticism about the ideal of marriage, weakened parental authority and a decline in discipline.<sup>44</sup>

Nor was the church free from the effects of this social disintegration. It was still plagued by disunity and sectarianism while Christian ethics, it seemed, were not reflected in, for instance, people’s sexual practises or in the commercial world. The church seemed to have little to say about the “growing number of human derelicts ... the by-products of our present social order”.<sup>45</sup>

Given these circumstances, said Watson, the church had to acknowledge that the social problems of the post-war years were precisely those which had blighted society before the war so the approach to social problems could not be as it had been in the past. Indeed by her attitude and approach in the past the church had actually contributed to present social disintegration.

After the war Watson spoke with a new directness that was a reflection of his frustration at the church’s failure, as he saw it, to protest vigorously against social inequality and his determination that

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<sup>41</sup> Watson, “Social Disintegration” in *Social Evils and Problems: The Church of Scotland Commission on the War*, edd. W.P. Paterson and David Watson (Edinburgh, 1919), 174-175. Watson incorporated “Social Disintegration” into a larger volume, *The Social Expression of Christianity* (1919) which brought together a series of lectures he had delivered at the Assembly College, Belfast in 1917.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-172.

those who had been slaughtered in the trenches should not have died in vain.

He recognised that there were many areas of the nation's political and economic life over which the church had no direct control. The church could not, for instance, formulate and implement economic policy. But it could, and ought, to be severely critical of economic and social policies – and the thinking behind them – which promoted or sustained social injustices. Economic and social policies had to be rooted in ideals and spiritual values and it was these ideals and values that the church was responsible for.<sup>46</sup> Yet it was precisely in these areas that the church in the past had “signally failed to arrest the disintegrating process” and was to some extent “guilty of accelerating” that process.<sup>47</sup> For too long the church's teaching had been “too individualistic”.<sup>48</sup> Churchmen had failed to preach sufficiently “the larger Gospel of the kingdom of God with its far reaching social implications”.<sup>49</sup> By focusing too narrowly on individual conversion churchmen had fostered the idea that the goal of Christianity was the rescuing of a “mere remnant out of a wicked world”.<sup>50</sup> But this attitude was the antithesis of Christianity for God had sent his son into the world to redeem it, not to condemn it. There was no such thing as a solitary Christian but by encouraging “exclusive individualism” the church had allowed the perception to develop that Christianity was about individual salvation only.<sup>51</sup> Worse, emphasis on exclusive individualism had given rise to elitism and to the misleading impression that there was a spiritual hierarchy and this had come to be reflected in *class* division. Indeed the church had positively encouraged class division by offering “mission halls to the poor ... splendid churches to the rich” a practice “abhorrent to the genius and spirit of Christianity”.<sup>52</sup> The church had not properly honoured the

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<sup>46</sup> Watson, “Social Disintegration” in Watson and Paterson, *Social Evils and Problems*, 173.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity*, 87.

<sup>51</sup> Watson, “Social Disintegration” in Paterson and Watson, *Social Evils and Problems*, 173.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

poor or championed their cause "as Christ did".<sup>53</sup> And because churchmen had not raised their voices clearly and fearlessly enough against social injustice they had actually acquiesced in some of the most shameful episodes in Scotland's recent history where the weak had suffered at the hands of the strong and powerful, the poor at the hands of the rich (the Highland Clearances, for example).<sup>54</sup> A failure to understand "the spiritual significance" of social and industrial unrest had led the church to tolerate rather than to criticise mammonism, greed, selfishness, pride and "the rampant individualism which seeks only its own aggrandisement regardless of the rights or sufferings of others".<sup>55</sup> In her ministry and in her membership the church had not adequately manifested "the simplicity, devotion, love, sacrifice and service of Jesus Christ. In too many ways ... She has been overcome by the world instead of overcoming it".<sup>56</sup> The root cause of social disintegration, argued Watson, was that society was not organised according to Christian principles. This was the church's fault because it had tended to separate faith and the secular world instead of ensuring that faith applied "in every department of our corporate life ... building up the social and industrial order according to ... divine principles".<sup>57</sup>

What, then, should the church do now in the postwar era? It could ally itself with the revolutionaries who wanted to bring about change through violent insurrection as the Bolsheviks in Russia had. It could continue to affirm the *status quo*. It could withdraw from the world altogether. Or it could teach that Christians must work for the transformation of the world and for its reconstruction on Christian principles.<sup>58</sup>

For Watson the last option was the only acceptable path. Violent revolution was unthinkable especially if brought about in cahoots with Bolshevik atheists.<sup>59</sup> Maintaining the *status quo* was "treachery to the

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>55</sup> Watson, "Social Disintegration" in Paterson and Watson, *Social Evils and Problems*, 174.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>57</sup> Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> For more discussion of the Church's options, *ibid.*, 57-64.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.



Christian ideal ... a betrayal of Christ".<sup>60</sup> Withdrawal from worldly affairs was abandonment of God's world, was "inconsistent with the law of 'love our neighbour'" and rested upon "that disastrous division of life into sacred and secular, into service of Christ and service of the world", that ran through Christian history.<sup>61</sup> The task of church ministers and members was to Christianise the social order and the whole of life through "Christian influence ... Christian opinion ... and Christian effort".<sup>62</sup> But in pursuit of its goal why, then, should the church not explicitly advocate socialism?

## Socialism

In his attempts to accommodate evangelical individualism with the new social thought, and to avoid what he called "the falsehood of extremes",<sup>63</sup> Watson argued that the church could applaud socialism on those points where it was compatible with Christianity but must repudiate it where it contradicted or denied Christian principles. The church should never become a mere department of the state but equally it could not allow itself to become too closely allied with any particular ideology or political group or party. He acknowledged that socialist ideology in Britain was not dominated by Marxist materialism and thought this was one of its great assets. He understood the strength of socialism's appeal and was impressed by its revivalistic fervour and missionary zeal. To many people, he noted, socialism had come "like a revelation, filling their eyes with visions of possible good and heralding the dawn of a brighter day".<sup>64</sup> Socialist leaders were to be envied for their "enthusiasm and moral passion ... the fire of the old Hebrew prophets against social injustice".<sup>65</sup> And the gospel they preached was not, as some critics claimed, a gospel of spoliation. On the contrary, it was the gospel of fairer distribution of wealth "and what Christian could oppose that?"<sup>66</sup> It was the gospel of equal opportunity for all, of brotherhood and mutual aid, of each for all and

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>62</sup> For a fuller exposition of which, *ibid.*, 64-76.

<sup>63</sup> Watson, *Social Advance: Its Meaning, Message and Goal*, p. x.

<sup>64</sup> Watson, *Social Problems and the Church's Duty*, 161.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

all for each. In these respects socialism was not unchristian. Rather it was the unchristian conditions of the social order that gave birth to socialism. What case could socialism have, asked Watson, if everyone had adequate employment, a decent and assured income, a comfortable house and appropriate leisure for mental and moral culture? Socialists claimed that the socialist commonwealth would not have slums or poverty or unemployment. It would give rise to universal brotherhood and to a social order in which every individual would be free to do his best for all and in which individuals would be able to realise their full potential as people. This was "a beautiful ideal and has been the dream of the poet, the prophet and the seer in every age".<sup>67</sup>

However, while Watson thought that socialists were right to reject Professor Robert Flint's definition of socialism as any theory "that sacrifices the legitimate liberties of individuals to the will or interests of the community"<sup>68</sup>, he did think that socialism always meant "the collective ownership of land and of the means of production, distribution and exchange".<sup>69</sup> As such it was just another economic theory so the church had a duty to treat it critically as with any other economic theory.<sup>70</sup> Individual churchmen and women were entitled to declare themselves to be socialists if they wished to, but "the Church as the Church cannot do anything of the kind".<sup>71</sup> The church had to maintain a critical distance. Although socialism was to some extent an expression of principles that Christ himself had sanctioned, whenever it appealed to revolution rather than to evolution, or attacked marriage or religion, or advanced materialism and denied people's spiritual nature and the importance of the individual, then the church's duty was to oppose it.<sup>72</sup>

In spite of the fact that he had said Robert Flint's definition of socialism was inaccurate it was precisely as a potential threat to individualism that Watson opposed socialism. Socialism, he argued, placed too much emphasis on the role of the state thereby undermining

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 164. Certainly this socialist aim was part of the ILP constitution and later of the Labour party Constitution ("Clause Four").

<sup>70</sup> Watson, *Social Problems and the Church's Duty*, 164.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

individual initiative and responsibility. Indeed state socialism would, in the end, result in too much interference with individual liberty and private life. It would bring in “strong central government” and “an army of officials”.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, it would be too bureaucratic and inflexible and would tend towards intolerance and tyranny.

Furthermore, socialism underestimated human nature and especially the power of self-interest and selfishness. It did not pay enough attention to human sinfulness and so underplayed the importance of the need for inward regeneration, “the cleansing of the heart which religion alone could effect”.<sup>74</sup> And though socialism borrowed much from Christian ethics it placed too little emphasis on “transcendence, infinity and spirituality”.<sup>75</sup>

Socialist leaders would not be able to fulfil their promises because they were too idealistic and ignored practicalities. Socialism was a noble but deficient ideal.<sup>76</sup> Watson argued that the chief place in the work of social advance and social readjustment must be assigned not to socialism but to the church “as the organ and instrument of the kingdom of God”.<sup>77</sup> However, though he thought socialism was impractical and failed to resolve the tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community, it is clear that his Social Christianity could be criticised for exactly the same reasons.

## Ends and Means

The kingdom of God, Watson argued, was Christ’s “primary and specific message”.<sup>78</sup> It referred to something much wider than the church because the church was founded to promote it. First, the kingdom is the rule and reign of God not only in heaven but also on earth and in the here-and-now.<sup>79</sup> The kingdom is the rule of God revealed by Jesus so it is a kingdom of love as well as of righteousness.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>77</sup> Watson, *Social Advance: Its Meaning, Message and Goal*, p. xi.

<sup>78</sup> Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity*, 89.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

It is visible and invisible, already present but also becoming "as the oak is in the acorn".<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, the kingdom is spiritual, worldly and social because it includes the regeneration of the earth. It is therefore the reign of God in society as well as in individual hearts.<sup>81</sup> So the kingdom is a new social order in which the whole of life is organised according to the will of God. It is an ideal state "in which injustice and oppression shall be unknown".<sup>82</sup> Christ had come into the world to transform all human relations in all spheres of life. When He said that His kingdom was not of this world He meant that its origins and principles were of God. Its location, however, was definitely this world for Christ had "distinctly taught" that "the kingdom of God is among you."<sup>83</sup>

Thirdly, although the kingdom is social, Christ "wisely refrained from announcing any definite social programme".<sup>84</sup> His method was to inspire not to organise: "He preferred to enunciate fundamental ethical and social principles that contained the promise of all true reform and were fitted to regenerate society".<sup>85</sup> By his death on the cross, Jesus had "laid deep the sure foundations of a world-wide and everlasting kingdom of love, sacrifice and service ... therefore the members of the kingdom must live the sacrificial life".<sup>86</sup>

The principles Jesus set out could be summarised in the phrase "love-in-action".<sup>87</sup> This love was the dynamic of all social reform and service, it was the essence of the Social Gospel and it was the duty of individual Christians to give expression to it "in every sphere of human activity".<sup>88</sup> Love-in-action must also be the guide to the church as an institution. The church's duty, as the instrument for realising the kingdom, was to sponsor and organise social work, to demand and to support social reforms that were in accordance with Christian

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.



principles, and to sound a voice of prophetic protest and social criticism until the social order was truly and wholly Christian.<sup>89</sup>

In his expression of Social Christianity Watson recognised that the ideal he upheld was theocratic<sup>90</sup> but that the church was no longer in a position to govern or legislate for society. However much it was the body of Christ, the church was now a voluntary organisation. It had no powers to compel people or democratically elected governments or society to conform to Christian principles so it had to rely on the efforts and persuasive powers of its members diffused throughout society, aided and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Watson's Social Christianity was an attempt to prevent the church from becoming a ghetto and expressing the ghetto mentality he thought was reflected in Protestant fundamentalism. Aware of the decline in the social significance of the church Watson was seeking to maintain as wide a role as possible for it in society. But in spite of the fact that he was forced to concede that, as A.C. Cheyne puts it, "Scotland had ceased to be an integrated Christian community in any meaningful sense",<sup>91</sup> his Christian social thought was still haunted by the spectre of Christendom and by the ghost of the godly commonwealth ideal. This attachment to old models of Christian culture and civilisation was perhaps the greatest weakness in Watson's social vision. And in any case, like the socialism he respected but could not advocate, his Social Christianity depended on individual conversion and subsequent evincing of endeavour in behalf of the cause; depended on individuals' willingness to be converted and choosing to join up.

## Conclusion

Writing about "Christian pragmatism" in 1957, Reinhold Niebuhr argued that Christian social thinkers had at last acknowledged that there is no *Christian* economic, political or social system. But there is a *Christian attitude* towards all systems. This attitude consists of a critical approach towards the claims of every economic, political and social system expressed in questions about its contribution to social justice in concrete situations. The critical approach is also a responsible approach that does not pretend to be infallible or refuse to

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<sup>89</sup> Watson, *The Social Expression of Christianity*, 121-212.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>91</sup> A.C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk*, 110.

decide between answers to particular economic, political or social problems just because each answer contains moral ambiguity:

We are men, not God; we are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history and probably no pure evil either. The fate of civilisations may depend upon these choices between systems of which some are more, others less just.<sup>92</sup>

Niebuhr's Christian pragmatism was one outcome of the Social Gospel that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the liberal Protestant evangelicalism of the North Atlantic region. David Watson was a key figure in the development of this Social Gospel in Scotland.

Bebbington has described how in the 1920s the unity of evangelicalism in Britain, as elsewhere, was falling apart. Although the movement had always been marked by variety in doctrine, attitudes and social composition, after the First World War it became sharply divided. In particular, with the emergence of fundamentalism the split between conservatives and liberals became deep and permanent. The Social Gospel was condemned by conservatives because, they argued, it drew attention away from the gospel for individuals and this criticism came at a time when liberals were trying to demonstrate the church's responsibility for the whole of society.<sup>93</sup>

However, in spite of what conservatives thought, liberals had not abandoned the priorities that had defined evangelicalism since the 1730s. Rather, liberals were seeking to give evangelical priorities new emphases that reflected new thinking about the world and humanity.<sup>94</sup>

David Watson had no doubt about the continuing importance of *conversion*. He was adamant that the good and just society depended on changed individuals:

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<sup>92</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr in *Social Christianity: A Reader*, ed. John Atherton (London, 1994), extract 12: "Christian Pragmatism – Theology and Political Thought in the Western World", 214.

<sup>93</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 181-228.

<sup>94</sup> For more discussion of on evangelical priorities, *ibid.*, 3 and 2-17.

[We must always] come back to the individual in whom we have the promise and potency of all we seek, the starting-point of the kingdom of God. It is with the individual soul that Christ deals. He redeems society through the individual, regenerates the world by saving the men and women who comprise it.... Give us regenerated lives and we shall soon see a regenerated society.<sup>95</sup>

However, he argued that individuals' conversion need not be sudden and dramatic but could be gradual, occurring along with, not in advance of, social change. The church's duty was to pursue individual conversion and social change at the same time for each complements the other.

Watson was equally clear that Social Christianity was *biblically* based even though it drew on the ideas and insights of, for instance, socialism. He focused his attention on the teachings of Christ in the New Testament, as he understood these in the light of the new biblical criticism. This reliance on the new biblical criticism attracted hostility from conservative evangelicals and distinguished Watson's evangelicalism from that of mid-Victorians. But he was unrepentant: "Let no-one fear that criticism will rob us of the Bible. Thanks to modern scholarship, the Bible is ... a more living book than it was ever before".<sup>96</sup> Men were none the worse, he said, for being shocked out of "unthinking traditionalism, dense ignorance and narrow views; shocked into an intelligent and living faith".<sup>97</sup>

Watson's Social Christianity also emphasised *the centrality of Jesus' death on the cross*. However, he wanted to shift the emphasis away from human sinfulness and the atoning power of the cross (though he never underestimated the importance of either) towards Christ's gospel of love and His teachings on the kingdom of God. So the *activism* that Watson demanded of individual Christians and of the church as an institution followed from his belief in the need for individual conversion, from the key role he assigned to Christ's teachings in New Testament and from his conviction about the ultimate significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, the core of the gospel of

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<sup>95</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 238.

<sup>96</sup> Watson, *Perfect Manhood*, 52-53.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.



love. Activism – “love-in-action” – should not be seen as following on from conversion. Rather, conversion blended with discipleship as a single lifelong process. And Christian activism was always social activism – by individuals, but together with and for others and for a better world in the here-and-now. In particular, Christianity had to recover its bias towards the poor and oppressed in society and was therefore bound to condemn any social and economic system on those points where it caused or permitted poverty and oppression. The church could only be the church – God’s instrument for the up building of the kingdom – if it spoke up for the poor. “It is well known in Germany”, Watson argued, “that the Church has never recovered the influence She lost through Luther’s blunder in siding against the peasants in their passionate cry for justice”.<sup>98</sup>

In many respects, then, it would appear that Watson *was* radical, particularly in his egalitarianism, when compared with, say, his early and mid-Victorian evangelical predecessors. But it is a mistake to emphasise discontinuity over continuity in his social thought. Watson was liberal, but he was nevertheless Reformed, Presbyterian and *evangelical*. In seeking to find a role for the church as a voluntary organisation in an increasingly secular society his instinct was to avoid extremes and wherever possible to chart a middle course. Thus, he argued, the church had to distance itself from the rampant, destructive aspects of the individualism of the past but could not let the advocates of socialism go unchallenged. The church could not allow itself ever to become a mere department of the state yet it had to demand and support social reform by the state whenever Christian principles dictated reform was needed and whenever state reform was in accordance with Christian values. The church had to resist the temptation to renounce the world, and so become an exclusive spiritual ghetto, yet it had to be more than just a glorified social work agency.

In short, the church had the difficult task of striking a balance between the needs and aspirations of individuals and the needs and aspirations of the community; between the need to convert individuals and the need to give help to all men and women regardless of their Christian conviction; between calling for social justice and at the same time retaining the support of the well-off.

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<sup>98</sup> Watson, “Social Disintegration” in Paterson and Watson, *Social Evils and Problems*, 174.



Yet, in the end, the realisation of the kingdom of God on earth, the Christianising of the social order, depended on winning hearts and minds for Christ. Precisely because Social Christians like Watson could not escape from the necessity of holding on to this crucial aspect of evangelical individualism it proved relatively easy for conservative church leaders in the inter-war years to reassert themselves and defeat the progressive minority. For once it is conceded that the good society cannot be achieved unless individuals change then it is difficult to resist the argument that individuals must *first* be changed.

Watson was clearly concerned that emergent fundamentalism was in danger of insisting on a too rigid separation between the church and the world. He also suggested that evangelicalism in the past had been too intent on separating the church from the world. On this last point, however, he was not being particularly fair to, or strictly accurate about, his evangelical forebears. In fact he was much closer to them than he cared to admit.

From its beginnings evangelicalism had focused attention on the immanence of God as much as on His transcendence. Evangelicals felt God to be intensely and immediately present. God's son, Jesus Christ, had come into the world and through Christ as saviour God was directly and personally knowable, intervening in human history and affairs. Without God's help human beings could do nothing. And what faith in Christ offered was fullness of life (in the here and hereafter), freedom (from the burden and wages of sin).

These theological convictions were the driving force of evangelicalism and had powerful implications for evangelical dealings with the world. They underpinned the conversion imperative from which in turn activism flowed and was understood as *mission* (and evangelicals proved themselves to be highly adept at manipulating the ways of the world in the interests of mission). Emphasis on activism gave church members, clerical and lay, the opportunity for working in the world through the church so although evangelicalism was strongly individualist it had always been outward looking, social, associative and communal. Indeed throughout the nineteenth century precisely because evangelicalism resulted in activism it was impossible for evangelicals to avoid dilemmas caused by the problem of how to be in the world but not of it. By and large, then, they did not insist on a rigid

division between the religious and secular worlds because this approach could not be squared with the belief in God's immanence.

Certainly, Presbyterian evangelicals in particular were keen to mark out clearly the respective responsibilities and rights of the church (as the body of Christ) and the state (as the national legal order under God). Nevertheless, Presbyterian evangelicals were adamant that God had created the world and that no institutions could or should operate without Him.

Evangelicals emphasised the integrity of the divinely created world and so struggled to remove what they regarded as evil or profane influences that threatened that integrity. Evangelical activism was marked by an emphatic belief in the church as a divine instrument and, among Scottish Presbyterians in particular, by a determination to overthrow what was regarded as the erastianism of moderatism.

The primary function of the church was to convert individuals and through them effect the transformation, through sanctification, of the whole of society. In Presbyterianism there was, as Watson recognised, a strongly theocratic flavour to the various solutions to the problem of how to work in, through and for the world without being corrupted by it that evangelicals tried. Presbyterian dissenters opted for separation from the state and the Establishment. Only this way, they argued, could the church be free to pursue its goals without interference from the state.

By contrast, for Thomas Chalmers the solution was to be found in a rejuvenation of the Calvinist godly commonwealth ideal. According to this view the state was to be the partner of the church fulfilling its God-ordained duty to provide the legal and financial framework within which the church could freely operate. The younger evangelicals of the 1830s, who later became the leading lights in the new Free Church, supported Chalmers' social bond philosophy but were much less patient, less deferential, less willing to compromise with the state than he.

Evangelicals had to make choices about what they thought "good" and therefore legitimate worldliness and what they thought "bad" and therefore illegitimate worldliness. These were, and are, difficult judgements to make. Historians have often accused evangelicals of hypocrisy for not following in private the morality that they proclaimed publicly and demanded all should adhere to. But as

Geoffrey Best has noted, hypocrisy was usually more apparent than real. It was rather a failure to live up to high ideals.<sup>99</sup> Or as Bebbington puts it, the undoubted existence of some hypocrisy was a sign “of the evangelical achievement in setting high standards of behaviour”.<sup>100</sup>

D.C. Smith has been especially critical of evangelicalism on the grounds that for most of the nineteenth century the mainstream Scottish Presbyterian churches failed to make any effective prophetic protest against social evils caused by capitalism and individualism.<sup>101</sup> Calvinist theology joined hands with *laissez-faire* economics and the church stood in defence of the *status quo*. The Scottish churches made few attempts to form or transform public opinion or to stir up the national social conscience. The clergy were little more than chaplains in the fortresses of power, wealth and privilege. They did not champion the causes of the poor, the exploited and the oppressed. And by “deifying” existing social and economic arrangements the churches “precluded the possibility of their engaging in any genuine social criticism”.<sup>102</sup> It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that this situation began to change.

Smith’s thesis has gained widespread acceptance among Scottish religious and social historians. But it should not be accepted uncritically. Smith has placed far too much emphasis on Calvinism as culprit. In fact

not just Calvinism was at fault for in country after country, whatever the ecclesiastical set up, the operations of the Dismal Science [political economy] in the nineteenth century produced similar results.<sup>103</sup>

In any case, even although the mainstream Scottish churches endorsed the social and economic arrangements of the society of which they were a part it does not follow that they were always entirely wrong to do so. The fact is that Smith’s analysis is anachronistic and does not

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<sup>99</sup> Geoffrey Best, “Evangelicalism and the Victorians” in *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, ed. Anthony Symondson (London, 1970), 48-49.

<sup>100</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 150.

<sup>101</sup> Donald C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>103</sup> William Ferguson, “Immutable Decrees – Iron Wages”, a Review of D.C. Smith, in *Expository Times*, April 1988.

help us to appreciate or understand evangelicalism in Scotland in its own terms and context. It is not really that surprising, for instance, that the churches upheld political economy in the nineteenth century because the strength of political economy “was that its doctrines were not held to be doctrines but facts, part of the ordinary everyday business of living”.<sup>104</sup> Most Scottish Christians did not offer a social critique of the kind Smith thinks they ought to have because they did not see the root of social problems in environmental but in spiritual terms. And evangelicalism was individualist because individualism was believed to be the best way of changing *society* given that real transformation could not come about unless people became real Christians. Evangelicalism harboured a genuine conviction that salvation, for individuals and society, could be attained through Christ and the church. And so in spite of its apparently somewhat harsh analysis of human nature, evangelicalism fostered compassion, sympathy and a sense of community. Thomas Chalmers’ godly commonwealth *was* a social critique however wrong headed it may seem in retrospect.

S.J. Brown, damning Smith with faint praise, makes similar points. Brown notes that by portraying the history of prophetic protest and social criticism in Scottish Presbyterianism as “the Church’s progress from the darkness of nineteenth-century Liberalism to the light of twentieth century Labourism”<sup>105</sup> Smith has presented an over simplified picture. He has not viewed church personalities in the context of their own times but rather has presented them “as either heroes or villains according to whether or not they identified with working class aspirations”.<sup>106</sup> The result of this approach is that the villains include nearly all the early Victorian evangelicals who were uncomfortable with social divisiveness. The community building efforts of Chalmers or Guthrie are dismissed as mere paternalism intended to uphold property and class privilege. But Smith’s treatment of evangelicals “makes it difficult to understand their widespread

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<sup>104</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *Late Victorian Britain* (London, 1990), 98.

<sup>105</sup> S.J. Brown, Review of D.C. Smith in *Church History*, 57 (1988), 399-401.

<sup>106</sup> S.J. Brown, *Church History*, 57 (1988), 400.



popularity or the enduring strength of evangelical Liberalism in Scotland up to at least the First World War”.<sup>107</sup>

In the inter-war years the evangelical social Christians like Watson were silenced, in church and society, by the resurgent forces of noisy and reactionary conservatism. But by the 1940s, and in the wake of another war, many of the ideas they had pursued re-emerged with new vitality and legitimacy in the discussions among churchmen about what kind of society there should be once the Nazis were beaten. The Church of Scotland’s Baillie Commission (1940-1945), for instance, suggested a range of “middle axioms” not unlike Watson’s avoidance of “the falsehood of extremes” and called for every economic and social system to be governed by two basic principles: justice and community.<sup>108</sup>

But the Commission still saw the role of the church in its social mission as *evangelistic*: it had to proclaim the gospel as it affects the whole of life though not at the expense of converting individuals – exactly what David Watson and like-minded Presbyterians had been saying since the early 1900s, and not as far distant from the evangelicalism of Thomas Chalmers as has sometimes been suggested.

*Edinburgh*

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of John Baillie’s Social Christianity and of the Baillie Commission: Duncan Forrester, “John Baillie as Social Theologian” in *Christ, Church and Society: Essays on John Baillie and Donald Baillie*, ed. David Fergusson (Edinburgh, 1993), 221-235.

